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A Poem for Christmas: Christmas Revels (1838)

By Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin
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Theme: History

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The Irish artist Daniel Maclise (1806–1870) was a well known artist of the nineteenth century and he painted many scenes featuring British and Irish history. His painting Merry Christmas in the Baron's Hall (1838) was eventually purchased by the National Gallery of Ireland in 1872. This festive work contains many figures of various ranks and degrees and depicts aspects of the declining traditional Christmas festivities of his time.

Merry Christmas in the Baron's Hall (1838) (Source: Gerald Leonard)

Maclise also wrote a long poem about this painting titled *Christmas Revels: An Epic Rhapsody in Twelve Duans* which he published under the pseudonym, Alfred Croquis, Esq. It was published in *Fraser's Magazine* for May in 1838.

Maclise's poetry was influenced by the British novelist, poet, playwright and historian, Sir Walter Scott's poem *Marmion: A Tale of Flodden Field*, published in 1808. *Marmion* is a historical romance in verse of 16th-century Britain, ending with the Battle of Flodden in

1513. Marmion has a section referring to Christmas festivities:

> "The wassel round, in good brown bowls,
> Garnish'd with ribbons, blithely trowls.
> There the huge sirloin reek'd; hard by
> Plum-porridge stood, and Christmas pie:
> Nor fail'd old Scotland to produce,
> At such high tide, her savoury goose.
> Then came the merry maskers in,
> And carols roar'd with blithesome din;
> If unmelodious was the song,
> It was a hearty note, and strong.
> Who lists may in their mumming see
> Traces of ancient mystery;
> White shirts supplied the masquerade,
> And smutted cheeks the visors made;
> But, O! what maskers, richly dight,
> Can boast of bosoms half so light!"

Maclise's *Merry Christmas in the Baron's Hall* shows around one hundred figures covering many different traditions of Christmas. In his poem, Maclise describes most of the activities taking place in his painting as these excerpts demonstrate:

> "Before him, ivied, wand in hand,
> Misrule's mock lordling takes his stand;
> […]
> Drummers and pipers next appear,
> And carollers in motley gear;
> Stewards, butlers, cooks, bring up the rear.
> Some sit apart from all the rest,
> And these for merry masque are drest;
> But now they play another part,
> Distinct from any mumming art.
> […]
> First, Father Christmas, ivy-crown'd,
> With false beard white, and true paunch round,
> Rules o'er the mighty wassail-bowl,
> And brews a flood to stir the soul:
> That bowl's the source of all their pleasures,
> That bowl supplies their lesser measures"

The Lord of Misrule stands in the centre of the painting holding his staff and leading the procession of musicians and carolers coming down the stairs with a boar's head on a platter. Father Christmas, 'ivy crown'd', sits in front of the wassail bowl and is surrounded by mummers (the Dragon and St George sit side by side) and local people. On the left side of the picture we see a group of people playing a parlour game called Hunt the Slipper. In the background on the dais (a part of the floor at the end of a medieval hall, raised a step above the rest of the room) the baron sits with members of the upper classes watching the proceedings.

While Charles Dickens famously drew attention to the idea of a family Christmas dinner

(*Christmas Revels* was written in 1838, *A Christmas Carol* in 1843), Maclise seems to have been more interested in the former collective celebrations of Christmas.

Many earlier traditions of Christmas involved the whole community celebrating together, entertaining or being entertained: wassailing, mumming, carol singing, medieval plays, dancing, cards and games. The increasing urbanisation and industrialisation of society had distanced people from what was seen as countryside and peasant revels. Dickens' novella *A Christmas Carol* (1843) showed a 'civilised' Christmas based around the nuclear family, far from the collective celebration (and chaos) of countryside communities whose egalitarian traditions posed a symbolic threat to the individualistic status-quo of burgeoning bourgeois society.

Maclise had an ongoing interest in the ideology, history, and traditions of ordinary people as can be seen in the subject matter of some of his paintings, for example, *Snap-Apple Night* (1833) [Hallowe'en traditions], *The Installation of Captain Rock* (1834) [depiction of violent nationalist 'Rockite' movement], *The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife* (1854) [depiction of the Norman conquest of Ireland and the death of Gaelic Ireland], and *The Trial of William Wallace at Westminster* (before 1870) [one of the leaders of the First War of Scottish Independence].

Many of the earlier Christmas communal/public traditions had their roots in pre-Christian nature-based pagan rituals. With the spread of Christianity, the church tried to incorporate pagan cults or feasts into the church, as Joseph F. Kelly writes, "at the end of the sixth century, Pope Gregory I urged the Roman missionaries to Anglo-Saxon England to preserve as much of the local culture as possible while cleansing it of its pagan associations." [1]

Pre-Christian traditions

Wassail, for example, was made from hot mulled cider, ale, or wine and spices, and used in an ancient Yuletide door-to-door drinking ritual or to drink to the health of the apple trees and scare away evil spirits.

A Christmas Eve 1842 issue of the *Illustrated London News*, depicting Father Christmas in a wassail bowl.

Father Christmas is the traditional English name for the personification of Christmas. In pre-Victorian times "Father Christmas had been concerned essentially with adult feasting and games. He had no particular connection with children, nor with the giving of presents." Father Christmas had been around since at least the fifteenth century whereas the popular American Santa Claus arrived in England in the 1850s and soon "distinctions between Father Christmas and Santa Claus largely faded away in the early years of the 20th century."

Mummers acted in folk plays such as St George and the Dragon, the theme of which, death and revival, relates back to earlier ideas of resurrection and the spirit of vegetation, a "magical ritual intended to promote the fertility of vegetation", where the main narrative structure includes "a quarrel, a death, and a miraculous restoration to life." [2]

The boar's head was an ancient tradition introduced to Britain by the Vikings and the Romans. The boar was killed as a sacrifice to their god Frey/Freyr as swine was the sacred animal associated with him. [3] Frey was "associated with kingship, fertility, peace, and weather".

Saturnalia (1783) by Antoine-François Callet, showing his interpretation of what the Saturnalia might have looked like

The Lord of Misrule, appointed to be in charge of Christmas partying at court, universities, and in the great houses of the nobility was similar to the mock king of the Roman feast of Saturnalia when social mores were turned upside down for the duration of the festivities (probably as a form of social catharsis). [4]

Holly and ivy are associated with the Roman Bacchhus cult whereby "holly was the female counterpart to the male ivy" and in wreaths were united as 'mythical parents that guaranteed renewed life in springtime. [5] Similarly, the evergreen fir tree was the "symbolic embodiment of the mythological world tree and wonderous, ever-fertile nature." [6]

Carols also had pre-Christian elements such as the Boar's Head Carol along with other carols featuring holly and ivy as their subject. [7]

The 12-day festival of Yule and the Yule log was historically observed by the Germanic peoples and connected to the Wild Hunt [a chase led by a mythological figure escorted by a ghostly or supernatural group of hunters engaged in pursuit, the hunters are generally the souls of the dead or ghostly dogs], the god Odin, and the pagan Anglo-Saxon Mōdraniht ("Mothers' Night").

Mistletoe was also important. Pagan cultures "regarded the white berries as symbols of male fertility, with the seeds resembling semen. The Celts, particularly, saw mistletoe as the semen of Taranis, while the Ancient Greeks referred to mistletoe as "oak sperm". [...] The Romans associated mistletoe with peace, love and understanding and hung it over doorways to protect the household."

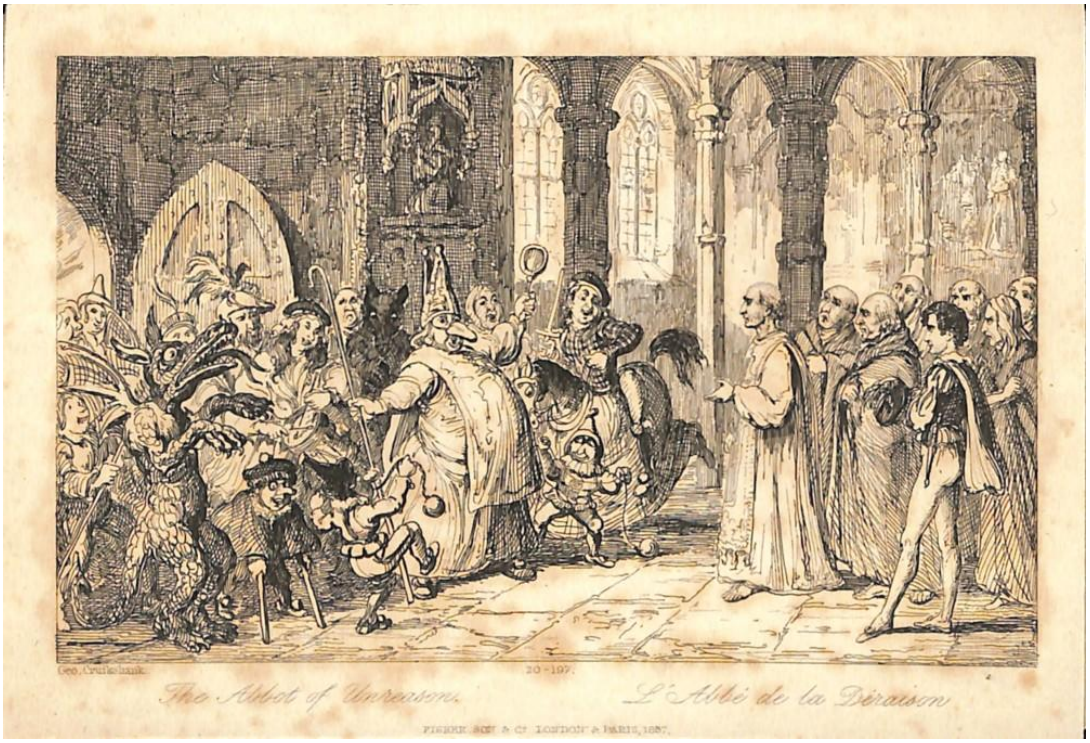
The Great Hall in Barley Hall, York, restored to replicate its appearance in around 1483

The Great Hall

All these traditions were exhibited in the local great hall when the tenants and locals were invited for the Christmas festivities. During the Middle Ages the great hall was a focal point as the "administrative centre of a manor in the European feudal system; within its great hall were held the lord's manorial courts, communal meals with manorial tenants and great banquets."

The great hall had many functions:

> "A typical great hall was a rectangular room between one and a half and three times as long as it was wide, and also higher than it was wide. It was entered through a screens passage at one end, and had windows on one of the long sides, often including a large bay window. There was often a minstrels' gallery above the screens passage. At the other end of the hall was the dais where the high table was situated. Even royal and noble residences had few living rooms until late in the Middle Ages, and a great hall was a multifunctional room. It was used for receiving guests and it was the place where the household would dine together, including the lord of the house, his gentleman attendants and at least some of the servants. The halls of late 17th, 18th and 19th-century country houses and palaces usually functioned almost entirely as impressive entrance points to the house, and for large scale entertaining, as at Christmas, for dancing, or when a touring company of actors performed."



The Abbot of Unreason (1837) by George CRUIKSHANK (1792-1878) – Collection

By the late 16th century the great hall began to lose its function as a local administrative centre and was used more for "large scale entertaining, as at Christmas, for dancing, or when a touring company of actors performed."

The American writer, Washington Irving, like Maclise, seems to have also been influenced by English manorial customs:

> "In his 1812 revisions to *A History of New York*, he inserted a dream sequence featuring St. Nicholas soaring over treetops in a flying wagon, an invention which others dressed up as Santa Claus. In his five Christmas stories in *The Sketch Book*, Irving portrayed an idealized celebration of old-fashioned Christmas customs at a quaint English manor which depicted English Christmas festivities that he experienced while staying in England, which had largely been abandoned. He used text from *The Vindication of Christmas* (London 1652) of old English Christmas traditions, and the book contributed to the revival and reinterpretation of the Christmas holiday in the United States."

While such gatherings were a source of the Romanticist regard for the feudal hierarchies of medieval times, they also contained the origins of much earlier communal peasant agricultural gatherings rooted in the cycles of nature's seasons and polytheistic worship of pagan deities and spirits. As the pantheistic traditions of the peasants went into decline, the stage was set for a new type of Christmas which was re-invented and emphasised family over community. As Paul Frodsham writes:

> "Prior to the accession of Victoria in 1837, no-one in Britain had heard of Santa Claus, had sent or received a Christmas card, or had pulled a Christmas cracker; few ate Turkey for Christmas dinner, and hardly anyone outside the royal family had ever seen a Christmas tree. By the end of the Victorian era, in the early twentieth century, these were all accepted aspects of our 'traditional' Christmas, celebrated as a major festival throughout most of the western world." [8]

Judith Flanders comments that:

> "Dickens took the changes to industrial society – office and factory work, urban poverty and want, food that was bought in shops, not grown in kitchen-gardens, cooked in laundry-coppers and commercial cookshops, not by servants in great halls – he took this new consumerist society, and through Scrooge's 'conversion', he turned it into a sacred duty. Following his lead – cooking the turkey, playing games, drinking toasts, or buying a toy for your child – became the quasi-religious observances of the new middle-class domesticity." [9]

Despite the strong connections between Maclise and Dickens (Maclise illustrated several of Dickens's Christmas books and other works), their artistic works show different emphases regarding Christmas and society, especially at a time when industrialisation was moving society away from largely agricultural cooperating communities to self-sufficient family groups. Today, the most similar events to the manorial gatherings of the past are wedding receptions in hotel dining rooms, with their large gatherings of people partaking in food, dance, entertainment and frolics.

St Albans Mummers production of St George and the Dragon, Boxing Day 2015-7

The collective gatherings depicted in Maclise's painting were significant in that they show the life of the community and their respect for nature. Today we are surrounded by the cults and culture of death. Christmas is an important feast because it is about life and renewal. Unfortunately, our tendency is to exploit and destroy nature, and now we are gradually realising the serious repercussions of these acts. Maclise's poem shows us a very different way of celebrating Christmas.

The full text of Maclise's poem is republished below:

> ***CHRISTMAS REVELS: AN EPIC RHAPSODY IN TWELVE DUANS***.
> BY ALFRED CROQUIS, ESQ. (Daniel Maclise)
>
> After the painting: *Merry Christmas in the Barons Hall* by Daniel Maclise (*Fraser's*

Magazine, Vol. 16, May 1838, p635 to 644)

HURRAH ! Hurrah!

I.
‘Tis the Feast of Yule, and all are gay
For Christendom’s brave holiday.
Room for old Christmas, crowned with holly:
No other days are half so jolly!
Room, room for Christmas, ivy-crown’d:
No merry days like his are found!
We cast our cares and maxims trite,
And wise remarks away to-night!

II.
Up to the fretted roof is sent
The mingled roar of merriment!
With blithesome laugh and joyous shout
Of comely maid or handsome lout,
That oaken roof full oft has rung
To laughing lilt from lusty lung,-
To boisterous mirth and honest glee
Reflected from its canopy;
But never lent its sheltering aid
To blither groups than here portray’d;
And never will its arch spread o’er
Such merry-making Christmas more.
The Baron with a courteous grace
Then sits him down, in pride of place;
And ready vassals near him stand,
And watch his eye for a command;
Towards gentle dames turn valiant knights,
Fierce from the brunt of fifty fights;
The haught eye quenched, the voice hushed low,
Quailing beneath a fairer foe, –
That voice the war-cry erst above,
Sunk in soft accents to his love.
Oh! not alone in youth’s soft hour
Love can assert his mystic power,
But may in manhood’s hour of noon
To soft strains his stern heart attune;
The ills of man’s decline assuage,
And tinge the sunset of his age.
Circling the fire, a merry band
The slipper hunt from hand to hand;
A romping group of happy faces,
As bright with ribands as with graces.
That shriek of glee! that laugh — that shout —
Tell the hid slipper is found out,
But not yet gain’d; though yon page tries

To check its progress as it flies.
Ah, happy boyhood! merry page;
Of just the frolic-loving age,
Ere serious chase your life engage.
The oaken table's mighty length
Will soon require its utmost strength,-
For, heap'd upon its ample board,
Good cheer in mountains will be stored;
A numerous clan, — but first, and chief,
In place and space, bold Baron Beef.
A merry king, in festive prank,
His virtues felt, and gave his rank;
Sir Loin, as renown'd a name
As heralds' blazon'd parchments claim,
For virtues rare, and wide-spread ſame.
His vassal-meats are ranged around,
And pasties huge might there be found,
Where every dainty did abound;
The mighty chine, the savoury goose,
Capons, and turkeys crammed for use,
The lusty brawn, the venison haunch,
And all that wholesome was, and stanch:
Such famous sweetmeats, too, stood nigh, –
Plumb-porridge there, and eke mince-pie;
And now the boar's head is brought in,
'Mid song, and shout, and music's din,
By lusty serving man, in pride,
With form erect, and scarf o'er side;
Between the tusks a pippin's placed,
Rosemary wreaths around it traced,
Garlands of flowers the dish has graced;
With laurel his fierce head is crown'd,
And loud the applause that rings around.
Before him, ivied, wand in hand,
Misrule's mock lordling takes his stand;
The baron's spear lauds to the skies,
And eke the boar's vast strength and size.
With vauntings huge he well can tell
The time, the place, and how he fell;
How such a famous hound he tore, –
Describe his eye, his crest, his roar;
And, ending, swear such chase, such boar,
He ne'er shall see, nor saw before.
On either side a gay page stands,
Mustard and spice-box 'tween his hands;
And close behind might there be seen
The woodman in his garb of green;
Drummers and pipers next appear,
And carollers in motley gear;
Stewards, butlers, cooks, bring up the rear.

Some sit apart from all the rest,
And these for merry masque are drest;
But now they play another part,
Distinct from any mumming art.
Ah! we're not able for the task,
To conjure up "The Christmas Masque;"
Or, if we were, what needs it, when
Preserv'd in pages of "rare Ben,"
It shines on us in all its glory,
From the bright regions of his story —
A Poet's heaven; and now not fainter
Glows on the canvass of the Painter;
And, as our tints cannot be warmer,
We'll merely name you each performer.

III.

First, Father Christmas, ivy-crown'd,
With false beard white, and true paunch round,
Rules o'er the mighty wassail-bowl,
And brews a flood to stir the soul:
That bowl's the source of all their pleasures,
That bowl supplies their lesser measures;
And as he brews, loud rings the laughter, –
He tastes before, and likewise after;
For as he throws in each ingredient
To try th' effect is but expedient.
And see them still fresh bottles bringing,
While loud the hall with mirth is ringing.
Once more the mixture, then, he tries, —
His lips approve, judge by his eyes.
Spices and wine are in the bowl,
And o'er the surface apples roll;
With rosemary sprig he stirs the whole.
At Christmas time, whate'er betide,
The hobby-horse was ne'er denied;
And dull that festal day had been
Where his gay prancing was not seen,
The maddest sport upon the green.
Where'er he bounds among the crowd,
There is the laugh and scream most loud,
Resounding as he goes along
Amid the gay and shifting throng.
All day the village through to roam,
At eve he makes the hall his home;
And, tired of being such a ranger,
Behold him now at rack and manger,
Replenishing his faded prime
To grace the sports of supper-time.
And so the hobby's turned his tail,
And sits his half-man to regale

On mighty beef and humming-ale.
Enters the wonder of the night,
The Dragon, with St. George to fight;
Armed cap-à-pie, from head to tail,
Against St. George in scaly mail.
What face is from his jaws a peeper
But that of honest John the Reaper.
The village tailor only all knows,
But keeps the secret of his smallclothes.
John deems an extra cup no sin,
Well to sustain his man within,
And thus to fortify his heart
Up to the pitch of Dragon part;
A reason John thinks of besides,
He carries with him two insides.
But, oh beware, my worthy Reaper,
Wassail may turn you to a sleeper.
Wassail a Dragon's eyes will close,
And lull e'en him into repose;
Lifting too oft a foaming flagon
Is not decorous in a Dragon.
But now he sets him at the table,
To eat and drink while he is able, –
Folds up his tail, thrusts forth his head,
And asks of Saint George to be fed;
For mark how Christmas old feuds ends,
The Dragon and Saint George are friends.
Enters Saint George in all his pride,
And takes his seat by Dragon's side,
Completely armed in pasteboard bright,
A famous champion and a knight.
The maidens wond'ringly admire
The hero in his rich attire.
One ties a sash, one pins a shawl,
And one a scarf flings over all.
The merry rogue who acts the Saint,
With smutted beard and cheek of paint,
Repays these favours of the misses,
Beneath the misletoe, with kisses.
And well they know the laughing eyes
That peep beneath the helm's disguise.
He now forgets both helm and mail,
And Dragon's wings and scaly tail;
Both from the same full beaken quaff,
And shout and sing, and roar and laugh.
That Turk, by Christian knight to fall,
'Mid laughter and applause of all,
The creed forgets which Turk denies;
Unchristianlike, the bowls supplies:
Yet he's rehearsing but his part

Allotted of the drama’s art,
And lifts the brimming cup on high,
His nerve’s firm steadiness to try,
With practised hand and steady eye;
Judge by that cup, which sheds no drop
Till at his mouth the brimmer stop,
That the wide whirling of his sabre
Will be performed with little labour.
Others in tiring room are nigh —
Sir Loin, Saint Distaff, and Mince Pie,
Plum Porridge, Carol, Wassail, enter,
Straight to the board as their own centre;
Mumming and Misrule, Baby Cake,
Now altogether merry make;
And he who acted to his name
Did best perform his part of game:
They ate and drank, till they in fact did
Look quite the heroes they enacted.
Such are the persons of the masque;
And now proceed we with our task.
Rogues, gipsies, jugglers, have got in,
From simple souls their pence to win.
Mark, first they sit in lowly place,
Nor of their calling shew a trace;
But as the strong ale goes about,
And lulls suspicion, they come out;
Till, bolder grown, they may be found
Where jokes and laughter most abound,
Tricking and juggling all around.
See, one on table takes his stand,
And one beside on either hand —
Wonder on wonder quick succeeds;
And good folks, puzzled, praise the deeds.
The old, with ill-concealed shame,
Look on and wonder, while they blame;
The young devour with ardent gaze,
And looks half doubting — whole amaze —
And give youths’ ever ready praise.

IV.

The brave old Hall was then to be seen
Prank’d out in garb of bright evergreen.
Over the hearth, and over the door,
Adown the wainscot from roof to the floor,
Along the cornice, and over the arch,
The triumph of holly and ivy doth march.
Suits of grim armour look bright and look gay —
Garlands of berries, like scarfs, o’er them lay;
And corslet and helm, shield, battle-axe, and blade,
Together in green robe of peace were arrayed.

High on the places where ladies may go,
Roof, door, and mantel-shelf, hangs mistletoe:
The maiden who stays ‘neath this licensing bough,
To the gallant who claims it a kiss must allow.
Hail to the mistletoe’s magic, that spreads,
Like a glory, its circle above their young heads!
Hail to the bough that, like wizard’s wand, weaves
A spell such as this from its mystical leaves —
Rains its sweet dew as from heaven above,
And hovers protecting o’er those who may love!

V.

The license much they seem to prize,
For many a pair the charm still tries.
Judge by the kissing that is there,
The mistletoe hangs every where.
An honest mirth flows all around,
Rasing distinctions to the ground.
No stateliness is to be seen,
Nor chilling distance intervene —
Good humour flows, and fills between.
The baron, see, nods to the squire;
The serf unto his lord sits nigher:
And hooded coif, and cap of pride,
Were oft seen seated side by side.
The village damsel might be seen,
In scarlet vest and kirtle green,
Blushing acceptance to the heir,
Who seeks a tenant’s daughter fair,
Her dimpled hand as boon to crave,
In accents humble as a slave,
To join with him the festive dance,
And thus the day’s delights enhance.
For Rank stooped from his airy height,
In honour of this single night;
State kept his robe for other places,
Nor of his grandeur shewed the traces;
And Ceremony’s jewelled gear,
As deem’d too cumberous to wear,
Was changed for lightsome trappings gay,
Such as best serve a holiday.
Then, room for Christmas, crown’d with holly!
No other days are half so jolly.

VI.

1.

Room, room for Christmas, ivy crown’d!
No merry days like his are found.
All mirth, all games throughout the year,
At merry Christmas reappear.

To Christmas each a tribute pays,
Levies of merriment to raise.
More joyous each seems to have grown,
When Christmas takes them for her own.
Then, room for Christmas, crown'd with holly!
No other days are half so jolly.

2.

The proof of this truth is quite ample —
Take what succeeds for an example.
On New Year's eve, a tinge of sorrow,
Reverting to the past, may borrow.
The future of an untried year
Less food for hope may give than fear.
The past, or friends or foes removed –
The next year's fealty must be proved.
Then, room for Christmas, ivy crown'd
No merry days like his are found.

3.

A Twelfth Night's jollity, at best,
Is but a little Christmas drest
In smiles and trappings of the old,
But less in mirth a hundred fold:
It is from borrowed lustre light,
But dimmer by a good twelfth night;
Yet let none from that lustre take,
Hid in the bushel of Twelfth Cake.
But, room for Christmas, crown'd with holly!
No other days are half so jolly.

4.

Shrove Tuesday's grave guests but appear
To bid adieu to all good cheer;
And o'er that night a shade is cast,
That for a while its feast's the last,
For morrow brings the sacred fast.
So, room for Christmas, ivy crown'd!
No merry days like his are found.

5.

Then through the Holy Passion week,
If joy there be, 'tis joy so meek,
When you reflect on Christmas gladness,
It seems to be allied to sadness.
Could o'er the soul such wish be stealing,
A kiss, in point of fact or feeling,
Could then be but committed kneeling.
But, room for Christmas, crown'd with holly
No other days are half so jolly.

VII.

May-day was gamesome eke of yore,
But all his pranks are wellnigh o'er;

Or else th’ observance’s so degraded,
‘Twere better far if all had faded.
Though earth is clad in vesture meet,
Fit to receive May’s dancing feet;
Though April sheds her rainbow showers,
To give to May her brightest flowers —
Lends to the hedge a sweet perfume,
And gifts it with a precious bloom;
Falls the laburnum’s showers of gold
To earth’s, like Danae’s lap of old,
When Jove omniscient took that form
Deem’d surest maiden’s heart to warm,
And shelter gained in Danae’s bower
By virtue of a golden shower;
Clusters the lilac’s flowery cone,
Luxuriant piled for May alone,
That takes the sky’s sweet violet hue,
And heaven so bathes with its own dew,
It seems as if in heaven it grew,
Without one taint of earthly soil
Its native purity to spoil.
Though still the fields expect their queen,
Bedecked in daisied garb of green;
And the glad streams have found a voice
To wake an anthem, and rejoice;
And the lark heavenward soars and sings,
O’er earth exulting as he wings;
And the wide landscape round looks gay,
In honour of her own sweet May:
Man seldom now his homage pays
In gaudy groups and gay arrays,
That cheer’d the May of other days.
No more the village Maypole high
Tapers into the clear blue sky;
By joyous youths ’twas reared erect,
By maids with flowers and ribands decked,
While both, uniting, gaily trace
The dance in circles round the base.
Wide as December is from May,
Or Christmas-night from young May-day,
The mirth with which each is supplied
— Though mirth ’tis still — is still as wide.
Christmas the hearth-stone clusters round;
May o’er the fields is to be found:
Yet something in our feelings tell,
If May we love, ’tis not so well —
They’re centered in that place of pride,
Our hearty, homely, warm fireside.
Lo, room for Christmas, crowned with holly!
No other days are half so jolly.

VIII.
When the blithe year is in its spring,
And ‘neath its influence the woods ring,
With notes of life, and joy, and love,
Springing from dell, and glade, and grove,
The earth wakes from its trance supine,
To honour sweet Saint Valentine;
And Nature, like a bride, rejoices
To greet her lover with glad voices,
Framing for him such roundelays
As she, in spring, can only raise.
Still, room for Christmas, ivy-crowned!
No merry days like his are found:
For there be other merry days,
Deserving well a separate praise.

IX.
And Michaelmas and Hallowe’en
Has each his merriment, I ween;
And many more than I can name
To joy and jollity lay claim,
Gladdening the heart as they appear,
Like stars to light us through the year;
Till breaks upon our view the light
That issues from the Christmas night.
The sky of life would be but dark,
If stars like these withheld their spark;
But, shining through this life-long night,
They give us glimpses of the light.
Blessings of peace and joy we call
On festive days, whene’er they fall;
But be more bounteously supplied,
Above the rest, to Christmas tide.
Then, room for Christmas, ivy-crowned!
No merry days like his are found:
Room, room for Christmas, crowned with holly!
No other days are half so jolly.

X.
But, well-a-day, those days are o’er!
Christmas may smile, but laughs no more
With all the lustiness of yore;
And faint the picture; vain to say,
The mirth that lighted up that day —
That light, which spread o’er home and heart,
Was of the Sun of Joy a part;
A gladsome beam, from heaven astray,
To cheer and bless us with its ray.
That light o’er lordly fane was spread,
And glistened through the cheerless shed —

Cheerless no more when hut and hall
Partakes the joy which pervades all.
For, like the sun, which lends his beam
To the vast sea and petty stream,
To objects bright new lustre brings,
And glorifies the meanest things.
Like that rare stone by sages told,
Which all it touched turned into gold,
So Christmas time made all hearts gay —
Made lord and slave alike that day;
And which the happiest — who can say?
Equality of joy to all,
In honour of high festival

XI.

Large were man's thoughts, for notions vast
Possessed his soul in days long past.
Huge was the table; vast the hall;
And free the bounty that gave all.
This gave the Yule-log to the fire,
And made the blaze burn brighter, higher;
The board with plenteous cheer supplied,
Nor to the guest aught wished denied.
In all wise-dwarfed, small is our praise,
For there were giants in those days;
Unlike to these, where, glories yet,
The Sun of Christmas had not set.
If snow-wreathed gable, roof, and wall,
Flower-wreaths decked window, hearth, and all;
If casements shook to winter wild,
The hearth with glow more ruddy smiled;
And eke our hearts with warmth were stored,
Chill winter's contrast to afford;
And treasured up those feelings gay
Which may illume the darkest day.
Young bright-winged Joy, with aspect fair,
His herald's flag waved every where,
And held a truce with hostile care.
Oh! that was not the olden time,
When the glad world was in its prime;
Then was its youth, and then its bloom:
Now it seems fitted for the tomb:
Its lustiness and vigour fled —
Its graces gone — its joys lie dead.
We're the true ancients. Habits fine
Serve but to glorify decline.
Our age is age, not youth imbued
With life, but eld's decrepitude.
If those were barbarous ages then,
Let us be barbarous again.

XII.

Then, room for old Christmas, with his crown of bright holly!
May his days all be glad, and his nights be kept jolly!
Laurel, holly, and joy, entwine in his crown,
For no king that e'er reigned merits half his renown.
For he smiles in due season, when our hearts want a cheer,
When all nature and man are both chilly and drear,
And illumes the decline and the dawn of each year.
Thus he's loved, as the nightingale's loved for his song,
When the village he cheers through the summer-night long,
By a soft serenade to his sweet-blushing rose,
As she peeps from her lattice, but feigns to repose:
For one love-song's more precious, while the moon shines so bright,
Than a hundred and one by the day's garish light.
Thus he's loved, as the robin is loved, when his lay
Is sung near the window the cold winter's day;
When, trusting to us, and forgetting his fears,
As the winter approaches our shelter he nears —
(Such reliance we love!), his small claim to allow.
He has ever been sacred — we worship him now.
Thus he's loved, as we love his own sweet evergreen,
Which rejoices our hearts when no flower is seen;
When bright holly, old ivy, themselves all alone,
Make of winter itself a spring-time of their own.
And the other gay festival days that appear,
Are the sunshiny summer-day things of the year.
But more grateful we feel for the sweet, precious light,
Which shines through our winter from bright Christmas night;
And winter is but the long night of the year,
Brightened up with the full light of good Christmas cheer.
And the full heart that speaks in the nightingale's tone,
Is not half so joyous or full as our own;
Nor the summer's long day of bright birds and gay flowers,
Half so gay or so bright as this night-time of ours:
For we turn from the bowers when the bird's song is loudest,
And regard not the flowers when the parterre is proudest.
They rejoice not for us. In the sunlight they smile,
And when *his* eyelids droop, then they slumber awhile.
No, for us they shine not; but, when summer is o'er,
The bird, and the flower, and the sun are no more.
Then the bird of the moon; and the rose we love best,
That a sentinel seems to watch over our rest;
And the robin we love, as he sings his sweet lay,
Near the window, to cheer us the cold winter's day;
And the flowers that love us, and to us are most dear,
Are the green things which help our old Christmas to cheer.

L'Envoy

Then, long life to King Christmas! his reign has been long
In our hearts and our homes, in our story and song.

Though his doubtful accession's enigma's not solved,
Obscure in the gloom of past ages involved,
Yet of one thing we're sure — it is no little while
Since "King Arthur kept Christmas in merry Carlisle."
Through the long list of kings do his triumphs appear,
And their pageants and battles are not half so dear;
With a king oft for guest, and a prince for his slave,
He his honours received, and in like manner gave.
He created his peers, too, so generous and grand,
To equal them none might be found in the land,
With power complete o'er the great feast of Yule;
A noble and churchman, of the true good old school,
Yclept Un-reason's Abbot and Lord of Misrule.
Then, room for old Christmas, with his crown of bright holly!
May his days all be glad, and his nights be kept jolly!
Laurel, holly, and ivy, entwine in his crown,
For no king that e'er reigned merits half his renown!

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Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin *is an Irish artist, lecturer and writer. His artwork consists of paintings based on contemporary geopolitical themes as well as Irish history and cityscapes of Dublin. His blog of critical writing based on cinema, art and politics along with research on a database of Realist and Social Realist art from around the world can be viewed country by country here. Caoimhghin has just published his new book – Against Romanticism: From Enlightenment to Enfrightenment and the Culture of Slavery, which looks at philosophy, politics and the history of 10 different art forms arguing that Romanticism is dominating modern culture to the detriment of Enlightenment ideals. It is available on Amazon (amazon.co.uk) and the info page is here.*

Notes

[1] *The Origins of Christmas* by Joseph F. Kelly (Liturgical Press, 2004) p60

[2] *Christmas Customs and Traditions* by Clement Miles (Dover Publications, 1976 [1912]) p300

[3] *The Medieval Christmas* by Sophie Jackson (Sutton Publishing, 2005) p25

[4] *The Book of Christmas* by Jane Struthers (Ebury Press, 2012) p26

[5] *Pagan Christmas: The Plants, Spirits, and Rituals at the Origins of Yuletide* by Christian Rätsch and Claudia Müller-Ebeling (Inner Traditions, 2003) p95

[6] *Pagan Christmas: The Plants, Spirits, and Rituals at the Origins of Yuletide* by Christian Rätsch and Claudia Müller-Ebeling (Inner Traditions, 2003) p24

[7] *The Medieval Christmas* by Sophie Jackson (Sutton Publishing, 2005) p53

[8] *From Stonehenge to Santa Claus: The Evolution of Christmas* by Paul Frodsham (The History Press, 2008) p158

[9] *Christmas: A Biography* by Judith Flanders (Picador, 2017) p128

Featured image: Twelfth Night Revels in the Great Hall (1838) by Joseph Nash, Haddon Hall, Derbyshire, from 'Architecture of the Middle Ages'.

Articles by: **Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin**